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ABSTRACT

A small but increasing number of school-aged children are engaging in home schooling--pursuing learning at home or elsewhere in the community. This digest summarizes research findings on and issues around home schooling. It describes the historical roots of home schooling, the estimated number of participants, the constitutionality and legal issues surrounding it, and the resources available to home schoolers. The effect of home schooling on children's social development is also examined. Disagreement exists about which is more beneficial to children--spending more time with mixed-age groups or with their peers. Public opinion is divided about home schooling. It is primarily opposed by professional educators' unions and associations; however, the parents' right to homeschool their children is generally upheld by the American Civil Liberties Union, most state legislatures, and the majority of respondents to a Gallup poll. (LMI)

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Home Schooling

Patricia M. Lines

A small but growing number of school-aged children will not routinely spend time in a school classroom this year. Instead, these children engage in *home schooling*—that is, they will pursue learning at home or elsewhere in the community.

There is no one way to do it. One family may begin with opening ceremonies to signal the start of the daily routine and follow a scheduled curriculum. Another family may opt for child-led learning, where parents provide help as the child expresses interest in a topic. Usually parents provide supervision and help, but most children assume increasing responsibility for choosing and carrying out projects as they mature.

Most families involved in home schooling organize activities with other families. Some children spend part of their time at a local public or private school, or a nearby college.

What Are the Origins of Home Schooling?

Schooling at home was a necessity in an age when there were a limited number of schools. After schools became universally available, some traditional groups, including the Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons, still elected to keep their younger school-aged children at home. The Amish kept their older children out of public schools, preferring to train them through life in the community.

In the 1970s, other families opted for home schooling, despite easy access to schools. In the early stages of this contemporary movement, most were pursuing a philosophy of child-led learning, as articulated by writers and educators such as John Holt. Later, many families with strong religious convictions also turned to home schooling.

How Many Children Are Home Schooled Today?

On any given day, roughly half a million school-aged children are probably learning outside of a school classroom. They make up about 1 percent of the total school-aged population and almost 10 percent of the privately schooled population. This estimate assumes modest growth since the fall of 1990, when data were collected from three independent sources—those state education agencies (SEAs) that have data; distributors of popular curricular packages; and memberships of supportive associations. Since each source represents the tip of an iceberg, upward adjustments were made based on surveys of home-schooling groups (Patricia Lines 1991).

Because many children are home schooled for only a few years, the percentage of children who reach age 18 with some home-schooling experience will be larger than 1 percent. Until a well-designed household survey is conducted, however, it will be extremely difficult to estimate this percentage.

To estimate the number of children engaged in home schooling within its borders, a state could begin with its own database, if it has one, then supplement it with surveys to assess how many families file reports or other papers required of home schoolers. States cannot assume 100 percent compliance with filing requirements. If a state does not collect data, an assessment of families who are members of state and regional associations could serve as a starting point.

Is Home Schooling Legal and Constitutional?

Today all state compulsory-education laws explicitly make home schooling a valid option, or the state interprets compulsory school-attendance laws to include "attendance" at a "school" located at home. States have also liberalized requirements for the home teacher. For example, parents do not need teaching certificates, and only Michigan requires the involvement of a certified teacher. Even in Michigan, however, court decisions have restricted the scope of this requirement.

With very few exceptions, all states require families to file basic information with either the state or local education agency (SEA or LEA). Many states have additional requirements, such as the submission of a curricular plan, testing of students, or, less frequently, education or testing requirements for parents.

In the past two decades, some states have charged parents with violating compulsory-education laws. Parents have responded with lawsuits asserting a constitutional right to direct the education of their children. Some courts have stricken compulsory-education laws

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EA 026 536

for being too vague or have found that more restrictive regulations exceeded the state education agency's statutory authority. Other courts have allowed prosecution of parents when their educational program does not meet state requirements.

The United States Supreme Court has not explicitly ruled on home schooling, but it did rule against compulsory school requirements in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), a limited decision involving the Amish. More generally, it has also upheld the right of parents to direct the education of their children.

What Resources Are Available To Home Schoolers?

Other like-minded families constitute a major resource for home schoolers. Local support groups form whenever there are more than a handful of families pursuing home schooling in a particular locale. There is at least one state-level association in every state, and in some states there are a dozen or more regional associations.

Other resources include libraries, museums, colleges, extension courses, parks departments, churches, local businesses, mentors, private schools, and, in some states, public schools. Books and other educational materials are also important. Many private educational institutions offer curricular packages, books, and other materials for use in home schooling.

Several states have innovative learning options. In Alaska, teachers in Juneau work with students located all over the state, staying in touch by mail, telephone, and through occasional home visits. In California, children can enroll in an independent-study program through a public school then base their studies in the home. Washington and Iowa require public schools to enroll children on a part-time basis if they apply.

Some districts have organized education centers where families may obtain resources, find instructional support, and/or sign up for scheduled classes. Other states or districts also allow part-time enrollment, "shared schooling," "dual enrollment," or similar forms of part-time school attendance.

How Well Do Home-Schooled Children Perform?

People disagree on whether home schooling is advantageous academically. Research has not determined whether the *same* children would perform better or worse in a public or private classroom, or in a home-schooling arrangement. Analyses of test scores are available, based on data from states that require testing or from home-schooling associations. Data from both sources may not be representative of home schoolers as a whole, however, because not all families cooperate with state testing requirements and private efforts rely on volunteers. Keeping these caveats in mind, virtually all the available data show that the group of home-schooled children who are tested is above average. The pattern for children for whom data are available resembles that of children in private schools.

People also disagree about whether home schooling helps or hinders a child's social development. Children engaged in home schooling spend less time with same-aged children and more time with people of different ages. Most spend time with other children through support and networking groups, scouting, churches, and other associations. Many spend time with adults other than their parents through community volunteer work, running their own businesses, tutoring or mentoring arrangements, or other activities.

There is no conclusive research suggesting that additional time with same-aged peers is preferable to more time with individuals of varying ages. Limited testing of a self-selected group of home-schooled children suggested above-average social and psychological development.

How Do Public Educators, Policy-Makers, and the Public View Home Schooling?

The practice of home schooling is controversial. The national Parent-Teacher Association opposes the practice; in 1988, the National Education Association adopted a resolution calling for more rigorous regulation of home schooling. And the National Association of Elementary School Principals has maintained that education is "most effectively done through cohesive organizations in formal settings." Since 1983, it has condemned home-schooling in its platform.

Other groups, such as the national American Civil Liberties Union, maintain that parents have a constitutional right to educate their children at home. Although they didn't necessarily approve of home schooling, a majority of Americans responding to a Gallup poll nonetheless said parents have a right to engage in home schooling. State legislatures agree, and many have amended their laws to provide greater flexibility for home schooling.

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An expanded version of this ERIC Digest is available in P. Lines, "Homeschooling," in *Private Education and Educational Choice*, edited by James G. Cibulka Greenwood Press, forthcoming). This version will contain more detailed information on home-schooling associations and references.

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